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**PRUDEN ON
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By
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Life gets unfair for the 'downeys'

Tip O'Neill ought to thank the Lord that Aunt Eunice isn't around to see what's going on in the House that Tip keeps.

(Aunt Eunice is the Maryknoll nun, long since gone to glory, who taught Little Tip all he knows about Nicaragua and Sandinista politics. Some of Aunt Eunice's friends and former colleagues still come around occasionally to teach the speaker about Central America).

Tip's Democratic-controlled House of Representatives, which not so long ago seemed to confuse Daniel Ortega with Walter Fauntroy — treating them both as non-voting members — is finally getting tough on communists.

Congressional Quarterly, which tracks congressional trends by carefully tracking votes, cites several fascinating conclusions after examining the tallies on several key issues:

- There's a noticeable switch in congressional attitudes, expressed in a new willingness to back guerrillas fighting communist regimes, as in Nicaragua.

- There's no enthusiasm for putting the United States back on the beat as the world's cop, but there's clearly a new climate on the Hill.

- There's renewed enthusiasm for supporting the Moslem resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and some members demand that the CIA give them better and more powerful weapons.

- At the urging of Rep. Stephen J. Solarz, the New York Democrat who opposes resistance to oppressive communist regimes elsewhere, Congress seems ready to support two non-communist groups struggling against the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia — beginning with a sum of \$5 million now, which could quickly grow to real help.

There's more:

- There's growing sentiment now in the House to join the Senate in repealing the so-called Clark amendment barring the president of the United States from helping insurgencies fighting the communist regime in Angola.

- In the wake of the continuing revelations of the Walker spy case, and what it says about confidence and trust between the United States and the Soviet Union, the House vote to exact the death penalty in spy cases, even in peacetime, demonstrates a new House concern that there may be — despite the assurances of Aunt Eunice and Little Tip — a "red menace," after all.

Ronald Reagan is in part responsible for the turn about in the House, where the speaker has tried to paint him as the man who wants to make America an evil empire. Over the passage of time, Mr. Reagan's rhetoric, the single-minded determination of the Marxists, and the front pages of the morning newspapers have persuaded several members of the House that "the red menace" actually is red and it actually is a menace.

And some members of the House, who know better and, more important, know that their constituents know that they know better, have suddenly begun to worry that they might be seen as "soft" on the menace.

Low Lehrman's Angola convocation of leaders of anti-communist insurgencies in Angola, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and Cambodia helped, too. There was considerable snickering in liberal salons when the photographs of that conference showed up on the front pages. (Mr. Lehrman, with his utter lack of sophistication, actually gave framed copies of the Declaration of Independence to the assembled guerrilla leaders, who in their sweet primitive state of political development, knew no better than to take them, gratefully).

Nevertheless, the meeting of the resistance chiefs made an impression among certain members of the House, and made them more receptive to the argument that lifting the prohibition on aid to the Angolan resistance lends an element of consistency to American policy, which zigs and zags like a drunk trying to walk a chalk line.

These members will continue to have hard going in the House, where there are plenty of Tip-alike liberals, like Rep. Thomas Downey of New York, who don't really want to help anybody.

But the "downeys" — the congressman's name has become something of a synonym for a congressional milquetoast — are, for now, on the defensive in Aunt Eunice's very own house.

Wesley Pruden is managing editor of The Times.